

WHY SMALL BUSINESSES SHOULD BE THINKING ABOUT DIVERSITY

A new service has been launched in the Geelong region aimed at identifying and breaking down the barriers to small business recruiting people with a disability. The twelve-month proof of concept project will see Disability Field Officers working one-to-one with local businesses.

Jessica Zammit is the Project Manager of the new Diversity Field Officer Service, and said, "There has been very little focus on building the capacity of small businesses to be able to tap into the business benefits of a more diverse workforce. Through the Diversity Field Officer Service, we will be working one-to-one with businesses that have between 5 to 100 employees to understand and build a more comprehensive picture of the needs of small business, as well as the opportunities and gaps. We will then tailor an approach for each individual business that will help them to become more confident, welcoming and accessible.

"This could be as simple as working alongside a business to review how recruitment occurs and whether there are simple barriers that can be removed. For example, having a requirement for an Australian Drivers License for every position in the business can act as a barrier for skilled candidates to apply for positions. It could be reviewing how jobs are advertised or whether flexible work practices are offered.

"Flexibility can have significant benefits for a workplace. If you do flexibility well, it can not only improve productivity and morale, but can make a significant difference for people with a range of disabilities and benefit the whole workforce, including employees who have other needs to be accommodated, such as parenting responsibilities," Ms Zammit said.

"It is about finding out what these minor things are that can make a huge difference to a workplace so that it is more accessible and welcoming for customers and potential employees."

The Diversity Field Officer Service will work with a maximum of fifty local businesses. As part of the service, a Diversity Field Officer will work one-to-one with a 'champion' within the business to undertake an individual business review, provide the business with

accurate and targeted information on how to improve processes within the business via a disability-friendly check, develop a customised plan to improve accessibility and establish the right connections so the business can confidently carry out its plan after the contact with the Diversity Field Officer ends.

Geelong's position as the home of the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) and the Barwon trial site of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), along with the city's strong local business network and statistical representation of Australia as a whole, made it a logical choice for the trial service.

As a community, our perceptions around and understanding of disability has come a long way, but there is still a long way to go and barriers to equity in employment remain a challenge.

Twenty per cent of Australians report having a disability and for many people that disability is not visible, such as the case with mental illness, chronic pain conditions or acquired brain injury. Thirty-two per cent of employees with disability work as professionals or managers. It is a significant statistic and one that challenges the perceptions of disability in the workforce.

"There is a common misconception that a person with a disability can only work in entry-level roles or for an Australian Disability Enterprise earning as little as \$2 an hour. Over one million Australians in the workforce report a disability; that is a lot of people in a wide range of industries. Disability is simply another life experience; it's just one element of a person," Ms Zammit said.

"This project is about building the confidence of employers to work with people who happen to have a disability at a whole range of career levels, including very senior levels, across all industries.

"We need to move beyond charity model thinking. This service is about enabling businesses to access a wider diversity pool with a broad range of talent and bringing in diversity of ideas and experience, including the resilience that a lot of people with disability bring to the table. And by being an inclusive employer,

businesses are better reflecting their customer base, which is a smart business move," Ms Zammit said.

The small business sector will be one of, if not the biggest driver of economic growth in Australia in the post-mining boom era. This presents an incredible opportunity in terms of scalable growth, of innovation on many fronts and the ability of smaller, more nimble operations to capitalise on new opportunities as they emerge. The challenges are the access to specialised expertise in areas including recruitment and policy development. Smaller businesses simply do not have the same resources, and therefore do not have the same capability in areas like recruitment and diversity policy development as their larger counterparts.

This, Ms Zammit said, is why this service has been developed, not to prescriptively impose yet more regulation on small business but to work with them to build a picture of what might be holding small businesses back from hiring people with a disclosed disability.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme is designed to deliver choice to people with a disability and their families. But for people with a disability, choice is more than just what services they can and cannot have funded access to.

While statistically workers with a disclosed disability – and many people with a disability still do not disclose – have a higher retention rate and lower rates of absenteeism, Ms Zammit pointed out that often people with a disability will remain in a job or with the same employer because of the barriers of getting a job elsewhere.

"I used to work very closely with people who are blind or vision impaired and there would be some people who worked for organisations for ten years. They would tell me that they had applied for other jobs but hadn't progressed to an interview, or that the moment they walked in to an interview with a white cane they could tell that the atmosphere had changed. These were highly qualified people with degrees and significant work experience behind them.

"Unfortunately, the truth behind some of the loyalty of people with a disability is poor awareness by new employers about disability and a fear of the unknown; fears that are often unsubstantiated."

Ms Zammit said that businesses that take part in the service could find that after three or four meetings they have received the support they require, while contact may be more intensive for another business depending on their needs.

"What we want to do is build the capacity of a business to feel confident to be able to be more inclusive and widen their pool of talent. We want businesses to become comfortable and informed so that if an applicant does disclose a disability, there isn't that fear about what to do or what to say. Businesses do worry about things like how an employees' peers at work might react if they disclose having a mental illness, for example," she said. "In this instance, it is about identifying the steps to remove that fear."

A key element of the project is working flexibly to suit each individual business involved, with Diversity Field Officers available to meet at times that are convenient to small business, including during and outside of normal office hours.

Small businesses are, by necessity, cost-focused operations. Being able to clearly understand any potential costs before an employee discloses a disability can make an enormous difference to how an employer or potential employer handles that situation.

"One of the things that we often hear is that business owners think that accommodating an employee with a disability is going to be expensive," Ms Zammit said. "Accessibility can mean many things, like having a program on a computer that reads information audibly via headphones to a person with a vision impairment. Between 85 to 90 per cent of the adjustments that people with a disability may require in a workplace cost less than \$500, which in the majority of instances is covered under the Federal Government's Employment Assistance Fund, meaning very little, if any, cost to a business. Some people with disability may not require any adjustments at all.

"What we seem to forget is that every time any business hires a new person, adjustments are made, whether it is a later start or finish time or re-allocating tasks that a person may not be strong at. The thing is that we don't draw attention to this; it's just part of the process."

Ms Zammit stressed that the project isn't about placing people with disability into roles, but rather about unpacking what it is that the business wants and the areas where confidence is most needed, which could lead to employment opportunities and better recruitment. She said the results of the proof of concept service would be used to inform the review of the Federal Government's re-tendering of Disability Employment Services, to provide a framework that better

supports small businesses and people with disability to get the support that they need.

The Diversity Field Officer Service is supported by 18 local, state and national partners, including the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO), Deakin University, Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, National Disability Insurance Agency, WorkSafe Victoria, Geelong Chamber of Commerce, Committee for Geelong, G21 Geelong Region Alliance, Disability Employment Australia, Australian Injury & Disability Insurance Network, Geelong Local Learning and Employment Network (Geelong LLEN) and local employment providers Matchworks, Ostara, St Laurence and Encompass.

The Geelong Chamber of Commerce is hosting the service's first event, which will focus on building a high performance workplace, with a breakfast event on Wednesday 30 September. The event will bring together Geelong leaders who will share their experiences of the benefits of a more diverse workforce and discuss opportunities for fostering innovation and recruiting across a wider field of talent through the Diversity Field Officer Service.

The event will be held at the Western Beach Room at Deakin University. Designed with small business in mind, this event aims to provide the confidence to take that first step.

For more information visit www.diversityfieldofficer.com.au or for event information visit www.geelongchamber.com.au/events

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DAVINA MONTGOMERY